

What you see, write
in a book and send it
to the seven churches which
are in Asia:
to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to
Pergamos, to Thyatira,
to Sardis, to Philadelphia,
and to Laodicea.”

Revelation 1:11

From Miletus he sent to
Ephesus and called for the
elders of the church.
Therefore take heed to yourselves
and to all the flock, among
which the Holy Spirit has made
you overseers, to shepherd
the church of God which He
purchased with His own blood.

Acts 20:17, 28

The New Testament **LOCAL CHURCH LIFE**

The Local Aspect, Leadership, Practice, and Maintenance

How is it then, brethren?
Whenever you come together,
each of you has a psalm,
has a teaching, has a tongue,
has a revelation, has an
interpretation. Let all things
be done for edification.

1 Corinthians 14:26

“You shall love the Lord
your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with
all your strength,
and with all your mind.”

— Luke 10:27

“Be kindly affectionate to one
another with brotherly love,
in honor giving preference
to one another.”

— Romans 12:10

Kevin Elias Hartwell

The New Testament Local Church

The Local Aspect, Leadership, Practice, and Maintenance

Copyright © 2026 Kevin Elias Hartwell

All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version.
This writing may be freely copied and shared for personal study, teaching, and edification, provided
it is not altered and no charge is made for its distribution.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Part I — The Local Aspect of the Church

The Church Hidden in the Old Testament
Christ Reveals the Church
The Church Born Through Resurrection Life
One Church in One City — The Church in Jerusalem
The Church in Antioch
The Church in the Cities of the Gentiles
The Fellowship of the Churches
The Universal Body and Its Local Expression
What is a New Testament Local Church?

Part II — Leadership in the Local Church

A Necessary Word to the Reader
Christ Alone the Head of the Church
The Mingled Spirit and the Exercise of Christ's Headship
Elders, Overseers, and Shepherds
Male Responsibility in Eldership and Service
The Development of Oversight in the Early Church
Stephen and the Width of Spiritual Function
Antioch and the Priority of Life Before Order
Plural Eldership as a Safeguard
Apostolic Gifts and Their Supply to the Churches
The Circulation of Life Among the Churches
The Danger of Independence
The Governing Principle of Leadership

Part III — The Practice of the Church Gathering

Why the Church Meeting Is the Most Distorted Reality in Christianity Today
The Church Does Not Exist for Meetings
The New Testament Pattern of the Church Gathering
When You Come Together
Each One Has — Mutual Function in the Body
The Goal of Every Church Meeting

Part IV — Maintaining the New Testament Local Church

Introduction
Revelation Is the Standard, Not History
Generality and Specificity in the Practical Church Life
What Is Non-Negotiable
What Is Negotiable
The Root of Division: Spirit and Truth Separated
Setting the Mind on the Spirit
Calling on the Name of the Lord
Praying the Word in Spirit
The Fruit as the Evidence
Love as the Governing Sphere
A Final Recap
Conclusion

Introduction

This document is intended to help interested Christians come to a clear and mutual understanding concerning the New Testament local church life. The New Testament presents a definite pattern regarding the church—its nature, its leadership, its gatherings, and the way such a church life is preserved in reality.

Without a shared understanding of these matters, it becomes extremely difficult for believers to live together in a church life that is consistent with the apostolic teaching and practice revealed in the New Testament. Differences of assumption regarding what the church is, how leadership functions, how believers gather, and how the church life is maintained inevitably lead to confusion, frustration, and division.

For this reason, the present writing brings together four related areas of the New Testament revelation concerning the church:

- the local aspect of the church
- leadership in the church
- the practice of the church gatherings
- the maintenance and preservation of the church life

Each of these matters must be seen together. If one area is emphasized while the others are neglected, imbalance easily results. When they are understood in harmony, however, the church life can function in a healthy, living, and scriptural way.

The burden of this writing is not to introduce a new movement, system, or denomination, but to return to the simplicity of the church life as revealed in the Scriptures. The goal is that Christ may be expressed corporately in every locality through believers who gather in His name, live in His life, and walk according to the teaching of the apostles.

The order of this study follows the same progression seen in the New Testament itself: the revelation of the church, the government of the church under Christ, the functioning of the Body in its gatherings, and the preservation of the church life in reality.

With this framework in view, we now turn first to the foundational question: What is a New Testament local church?

Part I — The Local Aspect of the Church

The Church Hidden in the Old Testament

For nearly four thousand years of biblical history, God was actively working among men. He called individuals, formed families, built a nation, raised prophets, established priests, and seated kings on thrones. The patriarchs walked with God. The prophets spoke for God. The priests served God. The kings represented God. Yet through all of this divine activity, one thing remained completely hidden from human sight: the church.

Before the word “church” ever appears in the New Testament, the Greek word that would later be translated “church” already existed in the common language of the day. That word is *ekklesia*. Even before Christ used it, *ekklesia* never meant a physical building. It never referred to stone, wood, architecture, steeples, towers, stained glass, or sacred structures. *Ekklesia* always referred to people. It meant an assembly of called-out persons gathered for a purpose. The moment the church is confused with a physical building, the New Testament revelation has already lost its true significance.

The church, therefore, was not a physical place of worship to be visited; it was the people themselves, born of God’s own life. It was not the product of human construction, but the outcome of divine life. Seeing this clearly delivers us from centuries of religious misunderstanding before we take even a single step further.

The church was not known to Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, or Isaiah. It does not appear in the law. It is not revealed in the psalms. It is not directly prophesied in the visions of Israel’s prophets. Paul later unveils why this is so when he speaks of the church as the mystery hidden in God from the ages and from past generations. The Old Testament reveals Christ everywhere in type and shadow, but the church itself was kept secret in God until Christ came, died, rose, and released it into history. The church is therefore not an Old Testament institution improved. It is a New Testament creation born out of Christ’s resurrection life.

Christ Reveals the Church

When we arrive at Matthew 16, the veil is lifted for the first time in all of Scripture. Peter, through divine revelation, declares, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Immediately the Lord responds with the first mention of the church in history: “I will build My church.” This is not spoken by a prophet, delivered by a priest, or decreed by a king. It is spoken by Jesus Himself, the Son of God and the Son of Man. The origin of the church is not in man’s religious thought but in the heart of Christ. The Builder of the church is not an organization, a movement, or a succession of leaders. Christ alone builds His church.

Two chapters later, in Matthew 18, the Lord speaks again and places the church into the realm of daily human living and responsibility: “Tell it to the church.” Thus, before the cross ever takes place, Christ reveals both aspects of the church. It is universal in nature and local in function. The universal without the local becomes mystical and unreal. The local without the universal becomes sectarian and narrow. Christ reveals both from the beginning, and they cannot be separated.

The Church Born Through Resurrection Life

The church does not come into being through human organization, doctrinal agreement, or religious zeal. It comes into being through divine life released by the Spirit. In Acts 1 the disciples are not encouraged to build anything. They are commanded to wait. In Acts 2 the Spirit descends, and what Christ promised in Matthew suddenly becomes a living corporate reality on the earth. Individuals are saved, but they are not left as isolated believers. They are added together. Salvation immediately produces incorporation. The Lord adds the saved into a corporate Body life.

One Church in One City — The Church in Jerusalem

When persecution breaks out after the stoning of Stephen, Scripture records that it was directed against the church which was in Jerusalem. By this time there are many thousands of believers in the city, yet the Spirit of God refuses plural language. He does not say churches in Jerusalem. He says the church in Jerusalem. Here a governing principle of the entire New Testament is established: one city, one expression of the church.

The Church in Antioch

From Jerusalem the divine current flows north to Antioch. There the gospel produces another local expression of the church. In Antioch prophets and teachers minister together, and the Holy Spirit Himself speaks, saying, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul.”

The Church in the Cities of the Gentiles

From this local church are produced more local churches: the church in Antioch of Pisidia, the church in Iconium, the church in Lystra, and the church in Derbe. In every one of these churches, elders are appointed locally. Throughout Matthew and Acts the word for church is *ekklesia*, God’s called-out governing assembly on the earth. After Ananias and Sapphira fall under divine discipline, Scripture says, “Great fear came upon the whole church.” The church is not only a place of grace. It is also the sphere of God’s holiness and authority.

After Acts, we come to what many consider the very kernel of the New Testament: the thirteen Epistles of Paul, fourteen if we include Hebrews. These letters contain some of the deepest and most far-reaching revelation ever committed to writing, not only concerning Christ, but concerning the church in its reality, its nature, its function, and its expression on the earth. What must be seen clearly is that every one of Paul’s Epistles was written with the

local churches in view, not with a divided and fragmented Christianity that would only arise generations later.

This is confirmed immediately by how Paul addresses the churches themselves. To the believers in Philippi he writes, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.” To the believers in Colossae he writes, “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ who are in Colossae.” To the believers in Ephesus he writes, “To the saints who are in Ephesus and faithful in Christ Jesus.” To the believers in Thessalonica he writes, “To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And to the believers in Corinth he writes, “To the church of God which is in Corinth.” In every case, Paul’s addressing is unmistakably grounded in locality. He is writing to saints who are in a definite city, who together constitute the church in that place. The universal revelation of the church never floats above the earth detached from geography. It always lands solidly in cities, among believers who live together and meet together as the church in that locality.

It is also striking that throughout the entire New Testament Paul never speaks of “churches in a city,” nor does he ever speak of “the church of a city.” There are never churches in Corinth, but the church in Corinth. There are never churches in Thessalonica, but the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is because there is only one Body, and that one Body can have only one expression in one locality. To speak of “churches in a city” would be to deny the oneness of the Body in practice. At the same time, the church is never *of* the city, because the church does not belong to any earthly government, culture, or civic identity. The church is of God. Thus the New Testament preserves both truths at once: the church is in a city with respect to locality, but it is always of God with respect to its source, ownership, and nature.

Paul writes plainly in Philippians 4:15, “And you yourselves also know, Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only.” Here Paul identifies the believers in Philippi as a definite local church, standing on its own ground of fellowship and responsibility before the Lord, yet in living coordination with the other churches.

In Colossians 4:16 Paul commands, “When this letter is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” This shows two distinct local churches in neighboring cities, each responsible before the Lord and yet in living fellowship through the circulation of the Word.

The case of Rome is especially instructive. Paul does not open the letter to the Romans by directly addressing the church in Rome as he does with Corinth or Thessalonica: “To all who are in Rome, loved by God, called as saints.” Yet this does not mean that a definite local church was absent there. In Romans 16 he sends greetings to Priscilla and Aquila and adds, “and the church that is in their house.” Here, in the capital of the empire, the Spirit again confirms the New Testament pattern. The believers in Rome were meeting locally and practically as the church, expressed in homes. This shows that the local church is not dependent on public buildings or religious structures. Wherever the believers in a locality gather in the Lord’s name, there the church in that place is expressed.

The Universal Body and Its Local Expression

When we come to Ephesians, we reach the highest summit of divine revelation concerning what the church is. The church is revealed as the Body of Christ, the one new man, the household of God, the kingdom, the holy temple, the bride, and the warrior. Yet at the very height of this universal revelation, Paul anchors the church firmly into local, corporate building when he says, “In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit.” The saints in Ephesus were not merely learning lofty truth. They were being built as the habitation of God in their locality. The risen Lord later addresses this same church directly in Revelation 2, confirming that the dwelling place of God in Ephesus was also a lampstand under His present evaluation.

The so-called pastoral Epistles fit this same pattern. First Timothy and Second Timothy are instructions to a co-worker laboring in the context of a real local church, with real elders, real widows, real problems, and real order in the house of God. Paul tells Timothy how one ought to behave in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth. Titus is left in Crete to appoint elders in every city, which again assumes that in each city there is a local church that needs proper care and administration. Philemon, like Romans 16, confirms that churches met in homes. Paul writes “to Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.” The universal truth of the church is always worked out in definite localities, often in the most ordinary of settings.

The same pattern holds throughout the rest of the New Testament. James assumes local gatherings with elders. Peter speaks of the flock of God being shepherded locally. John governs fellowship and discipline in real local assemblies. In 3 John, discipline is exercised within a definite local church. Jude warns the saints to contend earnestly for the faith in the midst of corruption. The New Testament closes not with a system, but with local churches. In Revelation 2-3, the Lord speaks individually to the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamum, the church in Thyatira, the church in Sardis, the church in Philadelphia, and the church in Laodicea — each church defined, named, and addressed by its own locality.

The Fellowship of the Churches

Alongside this local standing, the New Testament also reveals the fellowship of the local churches. This is seen with particular clarity in Second Corinthians chapters eight and nine, where Paul speaks of the grace of God given in the churches of Macedonia. Macedonia was a Roman province, yet the Spirit does not dissolve the churches into a regional system. They are still churches, still local in standing, yet flowing together in fellowship. Out from those churches of Macedonia came material supply to needy saints in another region. This was not hierarchy. It was not federation. It was not organizational control. It was the organic flow of life in one Body expressed through distinct local churches in living coordination.

What is a New Testament Local Church?

So then, the key word to understand is local. Local refers strictly to locality. A New Testament local church consists of all the believers in Christ living in the same locality and meeting as the church in that place. The boundary of the locality is the boundary of the church. This principle is never altered anywhere in the New Testament. Jerusalem had its

church. Antioch had its church. Ephesus had its church. Rome had its church. Each city bore one corporate expression of Christ.

Some strangely take the phrase local church and turn it into “The Local Church,” making it into a kind of denomination like Baptist or Methodist. But this is a complete distortion of the New Testament revelation. In Scripture, local church is not a title. It is not a brand. It is not a movement. It is simply a description of what the church is in a given locality. According to the Word of God, all the believers in a city already are the local church in that city in God’s eyes. There is no special group called “The Local Church” set apart from other believers. Nothing needs to be founded. Nothing needs to be invented. What is required is simply that believers drop the things that divide them and meet as the church in the city where they live.

Some object and say that there are far too many believers in large cities for this to be practical. Yet even here the New Testament principle does not change. The church remains one in each locality, even though it may meet in many places. There may be meeting place one of the church in a city, meeting place two, meeting place three, and so on. There can be many meeting places, yet still one church with one testimony of Jesus in that city. The practical arrangements of meetings never alter the divine boundary of the church. The locality remains the boundary. The meetings are only the practical containers.

And here we must speak plainly. The true obstacle is never logistics. It is never numbers. It is never geography. It is always the heart. When believers purely love the Lord Jesus Christ, treasure His Word above their traditions, and pray for one another in sincerity, divisions dissolve through fellowship. When the heart is single toward Christ, the way opens naturally. If some still choose to oppose, as many did in the early days, we simply go on enjoying the Lord, walking in peace, and committing the outcome to Him. The New Testament way is not preserved by argument, pressure, or reaction, but by love for the Lord, love for the saints, humility before the Word, and obedience to the Spirit.

So now, having followed the testimony of Scripture from the first words of Christ in Matthew, through the living history of Acts, through the deep unveiling of the Epistles, and through the final evaluation of Revelation, we can answer the question posed by this writing with clarity, certainty, and biblical authority.

A New Testament local church is all the believers in Christ who live in the same locality and who meet together as the church in that locality, under Christ as the only Head, according to the apostles’ teaching, in the fellowship of the one Body. The boundary of the locality is the boundary of the church. Nothing more is required, and nothing less satisfies the divine pattern.

It is not a physical building. It is not a denomination. It is not a movement. It is not an organization. It is not a religious system. It is the living corporate expression of Christ in a specific city, composed of all those who belong to Him in that place.

This is a New Testament local church.

Part II — Leadership in the Local Church

A Necessary Word to the Reader Before Proceeding

This present writing on New Testament local church leadership does not stand as an independent or self sufficient study. It flows directly out of, and is governed entirely by, the vision presented in the prior writing entitled *What Is a New Testament Local Church?* For this reason, the reader is not merely encouraged but earnestly entreated to read or reread that first writing before proceeding into what follows here.

Leadership in the New Testament cannot be understood in isolation from the New Testament revelation of the church itself. If the church is approached as a religious institution, leadership will inevitably be interpreted in organizational terms. If the church is viewed merely as a gathering for worship or instruction, leadership will be reduced to management. If the church is conceived as a denomination or movement, leadership will become positional, hierarchical, and competitive. In every such case, the life, the Body, and the organic nature of the church are quietly displaced.

But if the church is seen according to the Scriptures as the Body of Christ expressed locally in each city, as a living organism rather than an organization, as a spiritual house built of living stones rather than non-living materials, and as the corporate expression of Christ Himself on the earth, then leadership is rescued from institutional concepts and restored to its true spiritual meaning. Leadership is then seen no longer as a structure of control, but as a service of life under the direct headship of Christ for the building up of His Body.

Only upon that foundation can New Testament local church leadership be approached safely, clearly, and according to God's intention.

Christ Alone the Head of the Church and the Mingled Spirit

Before the New Testament speaks of elders, overseers, deacons, apostles, prophets, evangelists, or shepherd-teachers, it first presents Christ Himself in absolute supremacy. In the Gospels He declares, "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18), establishing that the church originates from Him and belongs to Him. In John 15 He reveals Himself as the true Vine and His disciples as the branches, showing that all life and function flow from union with Him. In John 10 He presents Himself as the Good Shepherd and the one Shepherd of the one flock. Peter confirms this same governing reality, calling Christ "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:25) and the "Chief Shepherd" over all under-shepherds (1 Pet. 5:4). **The church is therefore introduced not as a structure governed by men, but as a living organism issuing from and sustained by Christ alone.**

The Epistles then state this truth doctrinally: God "gave Him to be Head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22-23), and "He is the Head of the Body, the church" (Col. 1:18). His headship is not symbolic, ceremonial, or delegated to institutional systems. It is living and operative. The question therefore arises: How is this heavenly Head practically expressed and exercised on the earth among living believers? The answer is not found in outward organization, official hierarchy, or human arrangement. It is found in the mingled, or regenerated, human spirit of the believer in Christ. But what is the human spirit?

The human spirit is the deepest part of man, distinct from the soul and the body. First Thessalonians 5:23 speaks of “spirit and soul and body” (*pneuma kai psuchē kai sōma*), revealing that man is tripartite. This order is significant. It begins with the spirit, indicating the primacy of man’s inward, God-conscious organ. This threefold structure was already implied at creation. Genesis 2:7 declares that “the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Man’s body was formed from the dust, but the breath of life came directly from God.

Through this divine inbreathing, man received a spirit and thus became a living soul. Job 32:8 confirms, “There is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding,” and Zechariah 12:1 declares that the Lord “forms the spirit of man within him,” placing the human spirit alongside the stretching forth of the heavens and the laying of the earth’s foundation. The body contacts the physical world. The soul—comprising the mind, emotion, and will—contacts the psychological realm. But the spirit is the inward organ created by God for the specific purpose of contacting, receiving, and containing Him. Proverbs 20:27 declares, “The spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord,” indicating that within every human being there is an inward faculty designed to respond to God.

Many believers live primarily in the soul and are unaware that they possess a spirit distinct from their thoughts and feelings. Yet it is in this deepest part of man that regeneration takes place. When one believes into Christ, the Spirit of God enlivens this human spirit, making it the dwelling place of God and the sphere in which Christ’s headship is experienced and expressed in the church.

The principle of mingling did not begin in the New Testament. It was already revealed in type in the Old Testament. In Leviticus, the meal offering was composed of fine flour mingled with oil. The fine flour signifies the pure, balanced, and perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. The oil signifies the Spirit of God. These two were not mechanically mixed to create a third substance. They were mingled. The flour remained flour. The oil remained oil. Yet the two were blended together in one offering. This portrays the mystery of Christ Himself as both the Son of God and the Son of Man, divinity and humanity united without confusion, without separation, and without producing a third nature.

This same divine principle governs the believer’s regeneration. The Lord Jesus declared in John 3 that “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Regeneration is not the improvement of the old creation. It is not the refinement of the flesh. It is the birth of another life in another realm. The believer receives a new origin, a new source, and a new organ—the regenerated human spirit.

First Corinthians 6:17 then unveils the astounding result of this divine birth: “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit.” This is not poetic imagery. It is a settled divine fact. The regenerated human spirit is joined to the Spirit of the Lord. The two remain distinct in nature, yet they are one in life and operation. This is the mingled spirit—not a third nature, but a union of two natures in one living flow.

This divine reality can be illustrated simply. When a tea bag is placed into hot water, the result is no longer merely tea and no longer merely water, but tea-water. The tea remains

tea. The water remains water. No third substance is created. Yet the two become blended together in one living solution. In the same way, when a believer is joined to the Lord, the human spirit remains the human spirit, and the Spirit of God remains the Spirit of God, yet the two operate as one through divine mingling.

It is through this mingled spirit that Christ now exercises His headship in the church.

Romans 1:9 reveals that even Paul's service to God was not first outward. He testifies that he served God in his spirit in the gospel of His Son. Ephesians 1:17 shows that spiritual revelation operates in this realm, as Paul prays that God would grant the saints a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him. Ephesians 2:22 reveals that the church is being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit. God does not dwell in outward systems. He dwells in the corporate mingled spirit of His people.

Ephesians 3:5 shows that divine revelation is disclosed in spirit. Ephesians 3:16 shows that the inner man is strengthened through the Spirit. Ephesians 4:23 shows that transformation takes place in the spirit of the mind. Ephesians 5:18 shows that the believers are filled in spirit. Ephesians 6:18 shows that prayer operates in spirit at all times.

Taken together, these verses unveil one governing reality: Christ's headship is not exercised through organizational chains of command, but through the living flow of His life in the mingled spirit. No man, no group of men, and no organization replaces His authority. All local church leadership is therefore representative, never originating. Authority in the church is not personal possession; it is derived from Christ and expressed through the Spirit within the believers.

Leadership that does not issue from the mingled spirit and remain in alignment with the written Word of God inevitably becomes fleshly, psychological, traditional, or merely institutional. The Spirit does not operate independently of the Scriptures He inspired, nor do the Scriptures function apart from the Spirit who gives life. Leadership that abides in both the mingled spirit and the governing light of the Word remains under the inward ruling of Christ the Head. Where Spirit and Word govern together, Christ governs. Where either inward life is neglected or the Scriptures are displaced, structure replaces life and administration supplants spiritual reality.

Elders, Overseers, and Pastors as One Office in Life

In the New Testament, the three terms elder, overseer or bishop, and shepherd or pastor do not describe three different ranks of authority. They describe the same group of men viewed from three different aspects of the one spiritual function of care for the flock of God.

The term elder emphasizes maturity and spiritual weight. The term overseer emphasizes the responsibility of spiritual oversight. The term shepherd or pastor emphasizes the function of feeding and caring for the saints. These are not separate offices. They are three windows into one living service.

Acts 20 makes this undeniably clear. Paul first calls the elders of the church at Ephesus to himself. Later in the same speaking he tells these same men that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers and charges them to shepherd the church of God. All three designations

apply to the same group. Titus 1 moves in exactly the same way. Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every city and then immediately speaks of the qualifications of an overseer as though the two were interchangeable, because in the New Testament they are.

First Peter 5 confirms the same reality. Peter exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock while exercising the oversight, not by constraint, not for shameful gain, not as lording it over God's inheritance, but as patterns of the flock. Here again elder, shepherd, and overseer are three expressions of one living office.

There is no separate ruling pastor class ruling over elders in the New Testament. That division belongs to later ecclesiastical development. In the divine pattern, the elders themselves shepherd, oversee, and care for the saints as fellow members of the Body under the one Head.

Male Responsibility in Elders and Deacons in the Light of Creation and Redemption

When Paul gives the qualifications for elders and deacons, he speaks in clear male terms. First Timothy 3 says that a bishop must be the husband of one wife. Titus 1 uses the same language for elders. First Timothy 3:12 applies the same qualification to deacons. These verses are often treated today as isolated cultural instructions, but in Paul's mind they stand on far deeper ground.

From the beginning in Genesis, God entrusted the government of the human family to the man, not as a mark of superiority, but as a matter of responsibility before God. Adam was created first, and Eve was built from him and brought to him as his counterpart. When sin entered, God called to Adam first, not because Eve had not sinned, but because Adam bore governmental responsibility. This principle of headship in responsibility, not in worth, runs through the entire Scripture.

In redemption, this principle is not erased. It is redeemed, purified, and brought into Christ. The man remains responsible before God for the spiritual condition of the household, while the woman remains fully equal in life, grace, salvation, and portion in Christ. In the church, sisters pray, prophesy, serve, labor, teach children, shepherd younger believers, and function with full spiritual reality. Yet when it comes to governmental oversight of the local church, Paul places that burden upon the brothers as a reflection of household headship under Christ.

This arrangement does not elevate men above women. It places men under greater accountability before God. To be an elder or deacon is not to receive privilege. It is to receive responsibility, watchfulness, and future judgment. Those who bear governmental oversight will answer not only for themselves but for those entrusted to their care.

Jerusalem and the Organic Development of Oversight

In the earliest stage of the church in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts chapters 1 through 5, leadership is described almost entirely in terms of the apostles alone. The believers continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. The apostles bore the public testimony, exercised discipline, and made decisions for the church. No elders are mentioned in these early chapters. The church was still infant in life. The foundational ministry of the apostles alone governed.

As the church multiplied, practical needs arose that threatened to distract the apostles from prayer and the ministry of the Word. Acts 6 records the selection of seven men to oversee

the daily distribution so that the apostles might give themselves to their primary burden. This marked the beginning of functional service within the church beyond the apostolic ministry.

By Acts 11, a further development appears. Relief from Antioch is sent to the elders in Jerusalem through Barnabas and Saul. Now elders stand alongside the apostles in leadership responsibility. From this point forward, the phrase the apostles and the elders becomes the standard description of leadership in Jerusalem. What we see is not an instant institutional structure, but an organic development as life increased and the Body matured.

Stephen and the Width of Spiritual Function in Service

Stephen stands as one of the clearest demonstrations in the New Testament that office never defines the limit of spiritual function. He was chosen in Acts 6 to oversee practical service in the daily distribution. Yet almost immediately the Spirit revealed that this servant was also a mighty witness, teacher, and prophet.

Stephen did great wonders and signs among the people. He confounded trained opponents with wisdom and Spirit. He unveiled the entire history of Israel in a sweeping redemptive exposition. He exposed resistance to the Holy Spirit. He saw the heavens opened and Christ standing at the right hand of God. He sealed his testimony with his blood as the first martyr of the church.

Here we learn that in the New Testament, assignment does not limit capacity. Service does not diminish testimony. Function does not restrict gift. Life always outruns structure. Stephen was appointed for tables, yet released in glory.

Antioch and the Priority of Life Before Order

When the church in Antioch is first described in Acts 13, the leaders are prophets and teachers. Elders are not mentioned. This does not indicate disorder. It indicates that Antioch was still in a formative, outward moving stage of life. It was a missionary sending center governed by spiritual supply and prophetic direction rather than settled local oversight.

The Spirit spoke through the prophets and teachers to separate Barnabas and Saul for the work to which He had called them. This was directional ministry, not pastoral oversight. Later, after churches were established through their labor, elders were appointed in those localities. Acts 14 shows Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in every church. Life came first. Then order followed.

Plural Eldership as a Safeguard of Life and Oneness

Wherever elders appear in the New Testament, they appear as a plurality. The church in a city is one. The elders in a city are several. This arrangement is not accidental. It is one of God's strongest safeguards against domination, independence, and personality rule.

Plural oversight preserves fellowship among the elders themselves. It restrains personal ambition. It provides balance in judgment. It protects the saints from being shaped in the image of one man. It keeps the local church under the sense of Body rather than under the stamp of a single leader.

Apostolic Gifts and Their Present Reality

Ephesians 4 reveals that the ascended Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherd teachers to the Body. These gifts did not originate in church organization. They

are the result of Christ's ascension conquest and victory. Although the historic apostolic age closed with the end of the first century, the giving Christ has never ceased giving.

What was later lost, deformed, and degraded in Christendom was not the reality of these gifts, but the purity, liberty, and spiritual condition of the church that once received them in life. The ascended Christ still gives apostles for foundational labor, prophets for revelation and speaking, evangelists for gospel spread, and shepherd teachers for feeding and perfecting the saints.

These gifts do not rule the churches. They supply the churches. They serve the churches. They strengthen and perfect the saints. They never replace local eldership.

The Living Circulation of Fellowship Among the Churches

The closing verses of Ephesians unveil something rarely seen yet exceedingly precious. Paul sends Tychicus to comfort the saints and inform them of his affairs. Then Paul declares peace, faith with love, and grace flowing from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to the saints. What we see is a living spiritual traffic.

Christ supplies grace. The apostles transmit ministry. The coworkers carry fellowship. The churches respond in love, faith, prayer, and oneness. Everything moves. Everything circulates. Nothing stands isolated or hierarchical. This is the true atmosphere of New Testament leadership.

The Danger of Independence and the Safeguard of Fellowship

Where leadership departs from fellowship, division always follows. Independence was the root of Diotrephes' damage. It was the root of Absalom's rebellion. It was the root of Korah's destruction. Even the most gifted worker becomes dangerous when separated from fellowship.

Paul never acted independently. He submitted revelation. He traveled with coworkers. He received correction. He maintained oneness among the churches. Independent authority always wounds the Body.

The Governing Principle of Leadership

In the New Testament, life produces function. Function matures into order. Order never creates life. Gifts are given by Christ. Elders are recognized among the saints. Deacons serve practically. The churches function corporately. And all remain under the inward ruling of Christ in the mingled spirit.

A Final Word to Elders, Workers, and All the Saints

New Testament leadership exists for one purpose alone: the building up of the Body of Christ. It is not a career, a platform, or a sphere of personal power. Elders shepherd. Workers serve. Saints function. Christ alone remains the Head.

Where Christ governs in the mingled spirit and under the light of His Word, the church finds rest. Authority becomes restful because it is no longer personal. Ministry becomes living because it flows from life, not structure. The Body grows in life and in oneness. May the Lord recover this vision in every locality—not by adjusting systems, but by renewing hearts; not by elevating men, but by exalting Christ alone.

Part III — The Practice of the Church Gathering

Why the Church Meeting Is the Most Distorted Reality in Christianity Today

The present practical situation among Christians today is entirely unacceptable in the light of the Word of God. What the majority of believers now recognize as church and church life often bears little resemblance to what the New Testament reveals. This condition did not arise suddenly. It developed gradually through centuries of deviation, mixture, and institutionalization. **Yet at the root of the crisis lies a single, foundational failure: not knowing what a New Testament local church truly is, and not knowing the corresponding leadership that allows the life of God in Christ to flow freely in and through the members of His Body.**

When the church herself is misunderstood, the church meeting cannot help but be distorted. If the church is reduced to a religious organization, the meeting becomes a religious service. If the church is viewed as a building, the meeting becomes a scheduled event. If the church is seen as a clergy centered institution, the meeting becomes a performance conducted by a few and observed by many. In every such case, the organic Body of Christ is replaced by a mechanical system patterned after the world.

Because of this, the church meeting becomes the visible test of whether Christ is truly Head in practical reality and not merely in confession. It also becomes the thermometer of the church's spiritual health. If the meeting is alive, functioning, mutual, and full of Christ, the church is healthy. If the meeting is passive, controlled, routine, and lifeless, the church is weak. If the meeting is governed by outward organization rather than by the inward anointing of the Spirit, then the flow of divine life has been obstructed.

Across much of today's Christianity, what exists is not the living circulation of Christ through His members, but a religious Dead Sea. There may be an inflow of teaching, activity, music, and emotion, yet there is little or no outflow of living function from the members of the Body. Just as the natural Dead Sea cannot sustain life because it has no outlet, spiritual death inevitably settles wherever the circulation of Christ through the saints is cut off. Even where, by the Lord's mercy, something of real spiritual life enters such a situation, it cannot be preserved without the proper vessel. The Lord Himself said that new wine must be put into new wineskins. If the new wine of the Spirit is poured into old, rigid, religious systems, the system cannot contain it and the wine is lost. The issue is not the quality of the wine but the nature of the container.

Another sobering feature of the present situation is the widespread presence of unregenerate people in what are called churches. In countless congregations, what exists outwardly is a mixture of wheat and tares. It is entirely possible for individuals to attend church for years, even for a lifetime, without ever being born of the Spirit. They may be moral, religious, and outwardly involved, yet have never passed from death into life. To call such a mixed religious company the church is a terrible misuse of a holy term. According to the New Testament, the church is the Body of Christ, composed of those who have been regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit.

This is radically different from the New Testament assemblies. There, when the believers came together, the presence of the Spirit was so real and the operation of the gifts so living that an unsaved person entering the gathering could not remain hidden or neutral. The secrets of the heart were exposed, the conscience was convicted, and the unbeliever would fall on his face declaring that God is truly among you. The meeting itself became an instrument of salvation because God was present in power through the functioning Body. **Today, it is tragically possible to sit through thousands of services without ever being deeply convicted, confronted, or regenerated.**

All genuine recovery must therefore be grounded in love. Love for Christ must be primary. Love for the saints must be inseparable from it. Without love, even the most scriptural practices become empty form. Paul's concluding word in Ephesians 6 is deeply significant: peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruptibility. Love flows from God as the source. Faith rises up in the saints as the response. Peace and grace describe the result of this holy traffic between God and His people. Only in such an atmosphere can a proper meeting of the church exist.

The sober warning of Revelation 2 stands before us. The church in Ephesus had knowledge, labor, endurance, and discernment, yet the Lord said that they had left their first love. Truth without love leads to loss. Correctness without affection leads to spiritual decline. A church can be right in doctrine and wrong in condition. When that happens, the meeting cannot escape being affected.

The burden of this present writing, as the capstone to *What Is a New Testament Local Church?* and *What Is New Testament Local Church Leadership?*, is not merely to adjust the outward structure of Christian gatherings, but to call the Lord's people back to the revelation and reality of what a church meeting is according to God's eternal purpose. Only when the church is recovered in her true identity, and leadership is recovered in its organic function, can the church meeting be recovered in life and power for the building up of the saints and the expression of God on the earth.

I. The Church Does Not Exist for Meetings

This present word is the necessary third strand after seeing what a New Testament local church is and what local church leadership is. First, the Lord must recover in us a vision of the church in its essence as His Body, His house, His flock, and His bride. Then He must recover the kind of leadership that corresponds to that vision and allows the life of God in Christ to flow freely in and through the members. Only then can we rightly consider what a New Testament church meeting is in practice.

In today's Christianity, the very idea of a church meeting, as revealed in the New Testament, is almost unknown. Believers seldom think or speak in terms of the church coming together as a functioning Body under the direct headship of Christ. Instead, they think in terms of a church building, a sanctuary, pews, a pulpit, a pastor, a scripture reader, a music leader, a greeter, a service, and a sermon. They ask, "Where do you go to church?" or "What time is your service?" as though the church were a place and the service were its primary activity. The gathering of the saints has been recast as a religious event performed on behalf of an audience.

We must be clear: in the New Testament, the church does not exist for meetings. The church exists for Christ and for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. The meeting does not define the church. The church gives reality to the meeting. The church is born in regeneration, not in a service. The church is sustained by Christ as life, not by a schedule. The church does not live once or twice a week during a religious event. The church lives every day in the real and practical one another life of the saints in fellowship, prayer, mutual care, forgiveness, burden bearing, shepherding, exhorting, opening homes, eating together, and sharing Christ as food and drink.

The New Testament first reveals the church as the ekklesia — the called-out assembly of God in a locality — and then unfolds the profound organic realities that define what that assembly truly is. The church is not merely a gathering; it is the Body of Christ, a living organism sharing one divine life. A body is not an event; it is a living organism. A household is not a program; it is a family in daily relationship. A flock is not a time slot; it is a company of sheep under one Shepherd. A holy temple is not a religious performance; it is living stones being built together. A bride is not a weekly routine; she is a living person in union with her Beloved. When Scripture speaks of believers coming together in one place, it is the assembly of those who already share this organic life. The meeting expresses the life; it does not create it.

Where this underlying life is weak or absent, the service rushes in to take its place. The church service gradually replaces the church life. People attend a place, sit in pews, observe a platform, and listen to a sermon, yet may have little practical relationship with one another and little experience of Christ flowing through the members. Because the underlying life is lacking, the service must be filled with structure, activity, music, and presentation to compensate. The result may be outwardly impressive, moving, or polished, yet inwardly lacking in the circulation of Christ through His Body.

In God's thought, the meeting of the church is simply the overflow of daily church life in love. The saints do not arrive as spiritual strangers hoping to receive something from one gifted individual. They arrive as members of one Body who have already been touching Christ and one another. Their coming together is like many streams joining into a river. There is something to sing, something to pray, something to testify, something to supply, because Christ has been operating in many members in daily life.

Where Christ is the center, where love for Him and for His members is fresh, and where the one another life is real, the meeting is for the better. Where these are absent, even the most carefully designed service can, in the Lord's evaluation, be for the worse.

II. The New Testament Pattern of the Church Gathering

The New Testament does not leave us to guess how the church gathered. It gives us concrete patterns in real cities with real believers.

In Jerusalem, the first church did not begin with services but with life. On the day of Pentecost, thousands were saved, baptized, and added to the church. Immediately they

continued in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. They were together, they broke bread from house to house, they ate with simplicity of heart, they shared their possessions, they prayed and praised God. The meeting was simply the open expression of a shared daily life in Christ, not a detached religious program.

There is no trace of a clergy system directing the gatherings in Jerusalem. There is leadership, but not a religious class performing on behalf of an audience. There is no sanctuary concept, no platform culture. They met in homes and in whatever spaces were available, but the focus was Christ and fellowship, not religious ceremony. The power of those gatherings lay not in polish but in presence, the presence of the Lord in the midst of His people.

Corinth shows us the church gathering under correction. This church was divided and immature, yet it is to them that Paul gives the most detailed word concerning the meeting. When you come together, he says, each one has. Here we see that the normal expectation was that many would speak, many would supply, many would function. At the same time, Corinth also proves that openness without spiritual maturity is dangerous. Their coming together was sometimes not for the better but for the worse. Thus, in the same chapter that sets forth mutual function, Paul also sets forth regulation, discernment, and order. The pattern is not clergy control, nor chaotic freedom, but Spirit regulated mutual function for building up.

Revelation gives us the churches in Asia, each in its own city, each standing before the Lord directly. He walks in the midst of the lampstands and speaks to the churches, not to a central human authority or to a denominational system. This shows us that every local church gathering is directly responsible to Christ. The meeting is before Him. His eyes search it. His speaking governs it.

In all these patterns, several features stand out. There is no clergy system as later developed in Christendom. There is no audience model in which a few act and the many observe. There is no religious performance created for effect. There is a simplicity of gathering unto Christ, in homes and in whatever place is available, in teaching, breaking bread, prayer, singing, and mutual edification. The meeting is an organic expression of the Body under the headship of Christ and the anointing of the Spirit.

III. When You Come Together: The Meeting as a Corporate Event

Paul's repeated phrase in First Corinthians, when you come together, reveals that the church meeting is a corporate event, not a collection of private experiences. The believers did not come together as disconnected individuals seeking a personal blessing. They came as members of one Body, conscious that their gathering was the Body coming into manifestation.

In a modern service, people may sit side by side and yet remain essentially isolated. They watch the same platform, hear the same message, and sing the same songs, yet often leave unchanged in their relationship to one another. In a New Testament gathering, the meeting is a Body event rather than an audience event. It is a time when the corporate Christ is expressed through many members functioning together.

For this reason, the meeting is governed by the law of the Body rather than by the habits of religion. In a body, no member exists for itself. Each member exists for the whole. When this consciousness governs the meeting, speaking is for supply, prayer is for corporate breathing, singing is for mutual speaking of Christ, and teaching is for nourishing the saints. The entire meeting becomes a circulation of Christ.

Paul's emphasis on edification in First Corinthians fourteen shows that the goal of the gathering is not inspiration, information, or emotional stimulation, but the building up of the church. The church is built as Christ increases within His members and that increase is supplied mutually in the meeting. The gathering is therefore a real time test of the church life. If the saints are living Christ, the meeting will be rich. If the saints are divided, cold, and fleshly, the meeting will eventually expose that, no matter how polished the outward form may be.

The sobering word that it is possible to come together not for the better but for the worse reminds us that the meeting is never neutral. It either builds or damages. It either manifests Christ or manifests the flesh. To attempt to fix the meeting while leaving the daily one another life untouched is to treat symptoms while ignoring the disease.

IV. Each One Has: Mutual Function Governed by Love

Into this context Paul speaks the remarkable word: when you come together, each one has. With this single sentence, the Spirit overturns the concept of one man performing Christianity for many observers. The meeting belongs to the Body. It belongs to the members. It belongs to Christ expressed through all.

Each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation. This is not a technique for running meetings. It is a description of what happens when many members have been living Christ, enjoying Him, and caring for one another in love, and then come together. They do not arrive empty. They come with something of Christ to share.

At the same time, Paul immediately sets the divine boundary: let all things be done for building up. The question in the meeting is not simply, do I have something, but will this build the Body. Something may be genuine yet not timely, spiritual yet not profitable for the present condition of the church. Here love becomes central. Love does not seek a platform. Love does not insist on being heard. Love quietly asks, will this help the Body. Love speaks when speech supplies and remains silent when silence serves.

For this reason, **each one has cannot be separated from the one another life of the church. Mutual speaking is the fruit of mutual living. If believers do not love, forgive, bear burdens, pray, and shepherd one another in daily life, their speaking in the meeting will lack weight.** The Corinthians prove that liberty without love and the cross leads to confusion. Freedom of function without inward dealing becomes self expression rather than Body supply.

The recovery of mutual function today cannot be achieved by simply announcing that everyone may speak. It requires the rebuilding of the church in love, the strengthening of personal fellowship with Christ, the healing of relationships, and the growth of spiritual discernment. Where this recovery takes place, the saints no longer come empty. They arrive with supply. Christ flows from many directions. The Spirit moves freely. The meeting becomes the living operation of the Body under the headship of Christ.

V. The Goal of Every Church Meeting

The goal of the church meeting is not that the saints merely attend faithfully, enjoy music, hear sound teaching, or feel encouraged. These may all be present, but they are not the final aim. **The goal is that Christ be corporately expressed, that the saints be mutually supplied, that the Body be built up, and that God gain a living testimony on the earth.**

When this goal governs the gathering, the central questions change. Instead of asking, did I enjoy the service, the saints begin to ask, was Christ expressed, was the Body built, was God glorified, were the saints supplied, did the Spirit truly operate among us. Where this governing vision is present, the meeting becomes one of the most powerful and meaningful experiences in the Christian life. Where it is absent, the meeting gradually becomes routine and empty, even if outwardly impressive.

Every genuine New Testament church meeting is therefore a matter of Christ, by Christ, and for Christ. It is a meeting in love toward Him and toward one another, in which the life that has been lived daily in the saints flows out corporately for the building up of God's dwelling place.

Conclusion: The Recovery of the Living Church Meeting

In the Lord's mercy, there is still time for recovery. The question is not whether He can restore the New Testament church meeting. The question is whether we are willing to return to His way. The recovery will not begin with outward changes to a service but with an inward return to Christ as first love, to the church as His Body, to leadership that serves life rather than controlling it, and to a one another life in which the members truly care for and supply one another.

As these things are recovered, the meeting will be recovered. The Dead Sea of religious routine will give way to the flowing river of life. The table of the Lord will again be a genuine communion of the Body of Christ, not a mere ritual. The singing of the saints will again be the speaking of Christ to one another, not a performance. The prayers of the church will again be the breathing of the Body, not a formality. And the gatherings of the saints will again bear the mark that cannot be imitated, that God is truly among you.

May the Lord grant us light, repentance, and courage to turn from everything that has replaced His intention, and to be those in this generation who know in reality what a New Testament local church meeting is, and who meet together in Christ, by Christ, and for Christ, for the building up of His Body in love.

Part IV — Maintaining the New Testament Local Church

Introduction

This writing assumes that the New Testament revelation of the local church has already been seen. The earlier writings in the “What Is...” series addressed what a New Testament local church is, what New Testament leadership is, and what a New Testament meeting is. The present concern is therefore not basic definition but faithful continuation.

Once the revelation is seen and a church life according to that revelation begins to be practiced, a further and more difficult question immediately arises: How can such a church life be maintained without drifting into a system, without hardening into mere form, and without splintering into division?

The New Testament presents something remarkably simple and living: one church in one city, standing on the ground of oneness; Christ as the living Head; a plurality of elders shepherding the flock; and gatherings in which every member is encouraged to function according to the measure of grace received. The church is constituted by life. Organization may assist practical coordination, but it can never replace life, and it can never produce the church.

History, however, demonstrates that what begins in life can drift into form within one or two generations. What begins organically may become institutional. What begins in oneness may fracture through excess, reaction, or imbalance. Therefore preservation is not automatic. It requires clear sight, spiritual discernment, and a living walk in the proper realm.

Revelation Is the Standard, Not History

The authority of the New Testament pattern does not come from numbers, longevity, institutional success, or cultural acceptance. It comes from divine revelation. In the New Testament we do not read of multiple churches in one city distinguished by doctrine, ethnicity, culture, preference, or the personality of a leader. We read of the church in Jerusalem, the church in Corinth, the churches of Galatia, and the seven churches in Asia. The basis of fellowship was locality, not affinity.

The church is universal in life and essence, yet local in expression and practice. This is not a minor administrative detail; it is the practical safeguard of the oneness of the Body of Christ. When believers divide by preference, emphasis, or leadership, they may still confess the oneness of the Body in doctrine, yet they deny it in practice.

For this reason, truth must not be measured by prevalence. Revelation judges history; history does not judge revelation. Rarity is not evidence of error. Throughout the Scriptures, faithfulness is often minority. Once the divine pattern is seen, it remains authoritative regardless of how widely it is practiced.

Generality and Specificity in the Practical Church Life

To preserve the church life in practice, a crucial distinction must be maintained between matters God has specifically defined and matters He has left general. Where Scripture is specific, the church must be firm. Where Scripture is silent or general, the church must be generous. Confusing these two realms has produced great damage throughout the centuries.

When negotiable matters are elevated into absolutes, the church becomes narrow, judgmental, and oppressive. Liberty is treated as threat, and variation is treated as deviation. Saints are measured by conformity rather than by life. Such rigidity may appear to preserve purity, but it often produces division and stagnation.

Conversely, when matters revealed by God are treated as flexible, the church becomes loose and indistinct. Boundaries blur, testimony weakens, and the church gradually loses its character. In such a situation, tolerance is mistaken for love, and compromise is defended as wisdom.

The New Testament itself models this balance. The apostles spoke firmly where the nature of the church was at stake, yet they exhorted the saints to receive one another in matters of personal conscience. This balance cannot be maintained merely by written policies. It requires believers who live in spirit, who fear the Lord, and who love the church.

What Is Non-Negotiable

The following matters belong to the nature and testimony of the church itself. They are defined by apostolic revelation and cannot be altered without altering the church's character.

- **One church in one city** — the practical expression of the oneness of the Body of Christ.
- **The headship of Christ** — no human hierarchy, system, or personality may replace His direct authority.
- **The organic functioning of the Body** — every member supplying according to grace (1 Corinthians 12; 14; Ephesians 4).
- **A plurality of elders in each locality** — shepherding oversight, not clerical domination or single-man control.
- **The fellowship of the churches** — neither isolation nor sectarian independence.
- **Justification by grace through faith alone** — no mixture of works, law, or sacramental merit.
- **Moral and doctrinal holiness** — idolatry, sexual immorality, and heresy concerning Christ cannot be tolerated.
- **The Lord's Table** — the ongoing corporate remembrance of Christ and proclamation of His death.
- **The preservation of the church's spiritual nature** — no religious images, icons, statues, or visual mediation.

These are not preferences. They are pillars of New Testament revelation. To loosen them is not flexibility; it is departure. Yet even here, faithfulness must be expressed in a proper spirit. Non-negotiables are never preserved by human domination; they are preserved by Christ's headship in the Spirit and by shepherding care among the saints.

What Is Negotiable

Other matters, though frequently debated and sometimes used to measure spirituality, are not intrinsic to the church's being. They must never become tests of fellowship. Scripture supplies principles and governing motives, but it does not legislate a uniform outward form.

To preserve the church life, it is often necessary to name these matters plainly, because the flesh loves to turn preferences into laws. The following categories are representative, not exhaustive, yet they cover many of the common battlegrounds that have divided believers unnecessarily.

- **Dress** — what to wear, what not to wear; formal or informal; cultural expressions of modesty. The New Testament calls for modesty and sobriety, but does not legislate fabric, color, or style. Clothing must never become a badge of spirituality.
- **Diet** — what to eat, what not to eat; health convictions; vegetarianism or omnivorous eating; cultural preferences. This is not a joke: division can arise when believers insist on their own standard even over something as simple as fried chicken versus baked chicken at a church picnic. When food becomes a spiritual boundary, the apostolic spirit has been lost.
- **Observance of days** — Christmas, Easter, birthdays, national holidays, and personal commemorations. The New Testament institutes no annual Christian holy days, yet it allows individual conscience in how days are regarded. Such matters must not become corporate identity markers or measures of faithfulness.
- **Use of musical instruments** — to use or not to use; unaccompanied singing or accompanied singing. Scripture neither commands nor forbids instrumentation in church gatherings; therefore it must never be used to divide the saints.
- **Outward meeting arrangements** — time, length, order, and physical setup. A circular or semi-circular chair arrangement, where the saints face one another, is often simply common sense according to life: the church is a Body, not an audience. Yet even helpful arrangements must remain flexible and must never become rigid policy.
- **Frequency of the Lord's Table** — Scripture commands the Table, but does not legislate how often it must be kept. Therefore no schedule should become a law imposed upon all.
- **Form of the Lord's Table** — it is recommended that the Communion Meal be recovered, not merely a tiny fragment of bread and a thimble of grape juice. The New Testament context indicates a genuine corporate remembrance associated with an actual meal; the recovery of this richness is worthy of sober consideration, yet it must never become a new law or a source of pride.
- **Giving practices** — tithing as a voluntary discipline, or freewill grace giving according to what one has purposed in the heart. The New Testament binds no fixed percentage upon the conscience.

In all these matters, liberty must remain liberty. Yet liberty must operate in love. A negotiable matter becomes destructive when it is elevated into a test of spirituality, imposed upon others as law, or used as a badge of identity. Where Scripture has not legislated, the church must not bind.

The Root of Division: Spirit and Truth Separated

The deeper explanation for centuries of confusion and division is not merely that Christians disagree. It is that what the Lord joined together has been separated. The Lord's own words in John 3 and John 4 provide a governing key.

In John 3, the Lord revealed that the human spirit must be regenerated by the Holy Spirit: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Christian life does not begin with improved conduct, refined doctrine, or corrected practice, but with a birth in the deepest part of man.

In John 4, the Lord went further and declared that the Father seeks worshipers who worship in spirit and in truth. Worship is no longer bound to mountain or city, nor to inherited tradition or outward form, but to the living exercise of the regenerated human spirit according to divine reality.

Throughout the New Testament we see a striking prevalence of Spirit and of the phrase in spirit. The Greek word is *pneuma*. In many contexts translators must decide whether *pneuma* refers to the Holy Spirit or to the human spirit, whether it should be capitalized or not. In certain passages the distinction is not merely grammatical; it touches the reality of the believer’s experience, because the indwelling Spirit and the regenerated spirit are intimately joined.

This is why Paul can say, “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:17). The Holy Spirit indwells the human spirit, and the Christian life is lived in this mingled realm. This does not erase distinction, but it does establish a profound union in life.

When truth is upheld without being in spirit, it hardens into contention and system. Correct doctrine becomes a weapon, and non-negotiables become an instrument of control rather than a testimony of Christ. Conversely, when spirit is pursued without truth, it dissolves into instability and mixture. Spiritual enthusiasm becomes unanchored, and the church is tossed by feelings, opinions, and novelty.

The New Testament never separates spirit and truth. Believers are charged to walk according to the Spirit, pray in spirit, serve in spirit, and be fervent in spirit, while at the same time holding fast sound doctrine and continuing steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching. Only where spirit and truth remain inseparable can firmness and liberty coexist without destruction.

Setting the Mind on the Spirit — Life, Peace, and Transformation

Paul’s word in Romans 8 is precise: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). The flesh is not merely a passing irritation; it is a whole realm of fallen humanity apart from the Spirit, hostile to God and unable to please Him (Romans 8:7–8). When the mind is set upon that realm, the result is spiritual death — inward dryness, darkness, and separation from the flow of divine life.

By contrast, when the mind is set on the spirit — the regenerated human spirit indwelt by the Holy Spirit — the result is life and peace. This is not positional theory; it is experiential reality.

Paul connects this directly to transformation: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The mind, as the leading part of the soul, must be renewed. As it is turned from the flesh to the spirit, it is renewed; as it is renewed, transformation proceeds. Thus, setting the mind on the spirit is not only the pathway to life and peace — it is the pathway to transformation.

How then is the mind set on the spirit? The New Testament provides practical ways to cooperate with the indwelling Lord.

Calling on the Name of the Lord

Romans 10:12–13 declares that the Lord is rich to all who call upon Him. Calling “Lord Jesus” is not vain repetition; it is an exercise of the spirit. When a believer audibly and sincerely calls upon the Lord, the mind is redirected from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the spirit. This can be tested in daily life. The result is life and peace.

Praying the Word in Spirit

Ephesians 6:17–18 joins the Word and prayer: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying always... in the Spirit.” If one does not know what to pray, one may take the exact words of Scripture and speak them back to the Lord:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

“Amen. Blessed be the God and Father...”

“Oh, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

There is no strict formula. Sometimes a phrase is repeated. Sometimes thanksgiving flows from a clause. The point is not structure but contact.

Paul wrote, “The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (2 Timothy 4:22). The Christian life is the Lord with our spirit. As the Word is prayed in this way, the mind descends into the spirit, is renewed, and transformation proceeds.

The Fruit as the Evidence

Galatians 5:22–23 lists the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are not manufactured virtues but the spontaneous expression of a life governed by the Spirit. Where the mind is set on the spirit, such fruit appears.

Love as the Governing Sphere

Even correct distinctions cannot preserve the church unless governed by love. Truth without love becomes harsh. Liberty without love becomes self-assertion. Authority without love becomes control. Therefore, love is not an optional addition to proper practice; it is the atmosphere and motive in which proper practice remains healthy.

Love does not cancel truth. It governs how truth is held and how correction is administered. Love does not excuse sin, but it seeks restoration. Love does not avoid clarity, but it refuses domination. Where love governs, negotiables do not become battlefields and non-negotiables do not become weapons.

The church is preserved not by watchdogs but by shepherds. Authority in the church is not exercised by position, pressure, or fear, but by spiritual weight, moral credibility, and sacrificial care. When love is absent, the attempt to preserve the church life often reproduces the very damage it seeks to correct.

A Final Recap: What is Non-Negotiable, What is Negotiable, and the Realm in Which Both Are Preserved

If the New Testament local church life is to be maintained and continued, clarity must remain where God has spoken, and liberty must remain where God has not. Confusion at this point inevitably leads either to rigidity or to compromise. Therefore it is helpful to summarize plainly what is non-negotiable, what is negotiable, and where both are preserved.

What is non-negotiable belongs to the nature and testimony of the church itself. It cannot be adjusted without altering the church's character. What is negotiable belongs to the realm of conscience, culture, and outward arrangement, where Scripture supplies principles rather than regulations. Both realms must be recognized, yet neither can be handled rightly apart from the realm of spirit and truth.

The church is preserved where believers live in their regenerated spirit, joined to the Lord as one spirit, and governed by divine truth expressed in love. When truth is upheld without spirit, it becomes contention; when spirit is pursued without truth, it becomes mixture. But when spirit and truth remain inseparable, the church can be both firm and spacious, both clear and generous, both faithful and loving.

Conclusion

The New Testament local church life is preserved not by regulation or reaction, but by believers living in their regenerated spirit, holding firmly to revealed truth, and exercising liberty in love. When spirit and truth remain joined, the church remains living. When separated, division follows. The burden of this writing is not to create something new, but to maintain what revelation has already given, so that Christ may be expressed corporately in every locality through a people who worship in spirit and in truth.